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ABSTRACT

The teaching activities presented in this paper introduce elementary pupils to illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, and, in doing so, integrate art and language and also provoke interest in history. The paper provides references, tells how to produce an illuminated calendar page (including getting background information on the history of the illuminated manuscript and on the process of illumination), and suggests related activities, such as creating scenes, poems, letters, and decorative borders. (EL)

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FEATURE PROJECT

A Bright Idea

For some time I have been introducing elementary pupils to illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages—those early handmade books decorated with elaborate lettering, miniature pictures, and brilliant colors. The introduction consists of a week-long project that integrates art and language, and that provokes interest in history, too. At the end of one week, students will have completed their own "illuminated" calendar pages, after following steps such as these:

- looking at and talking about reproductions of illuminated manuscripts
- deciding on possible themes to be pictured on a calendar page, such as "winter sports" or "spring fever"
- drawing scenes and finding magazine pictures that match the chosen theme
- writing and lettering a poem that expresses the chosen theme
- planning the page layout of the poem and the pictures and assembling the various parts into a finished "illuminated page"

You can tailor the "illumination" process to the precise needs and talents of your students. An entire class of first or second graders could work together creating one calendar page, or small groups of older students could take on one month apiece.

Required materials include:

- a wide variety of magazines with glossy photographs
- greeting cards (the most appropriate are used Christmas cards with ornate borders and detailed miniature people and animals, but any greeting cards with detailed artwork can be used)

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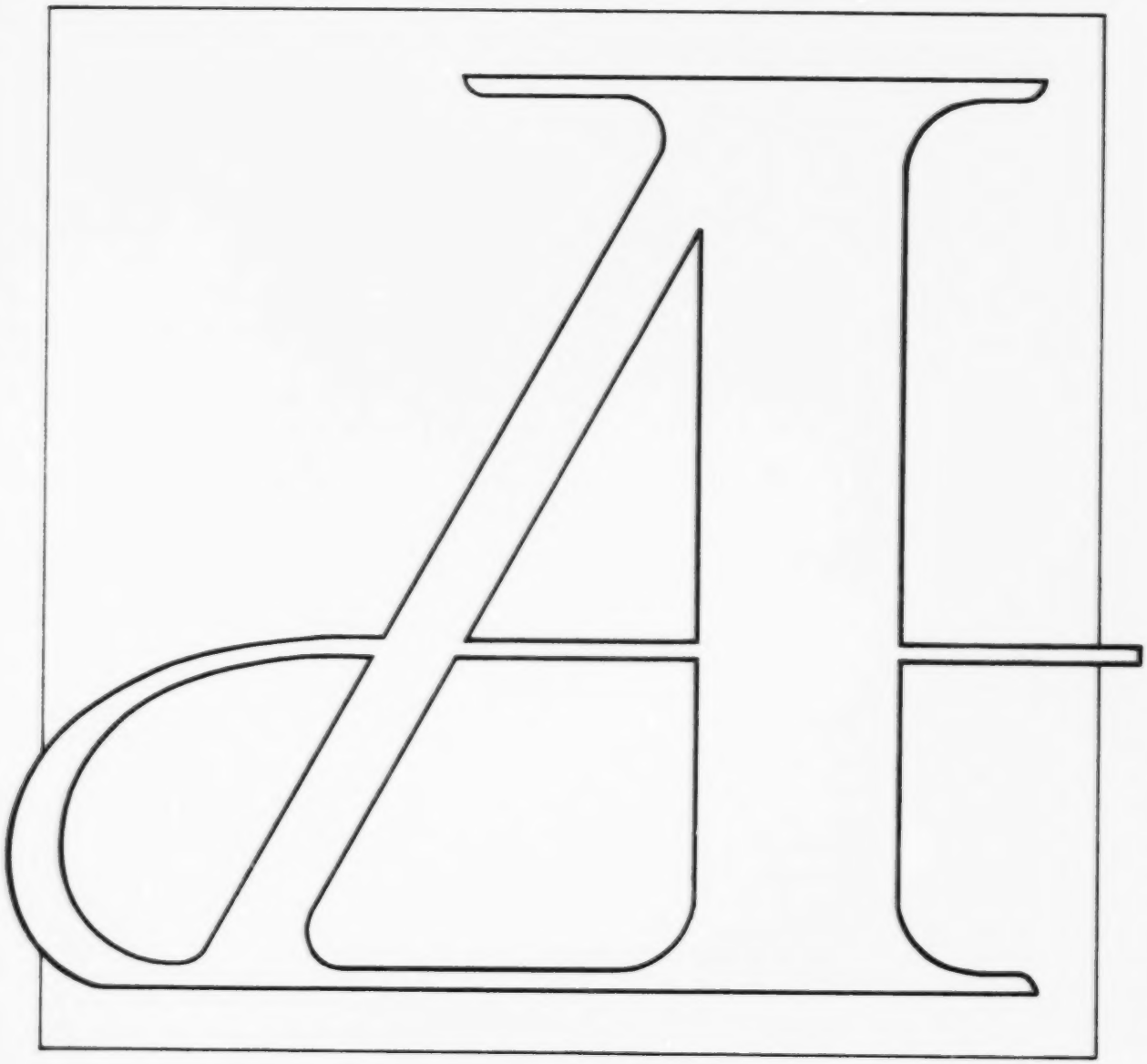

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- fine- and broad-tipped markers of many colors
- 11" × 14" sheets of heavy poster board
- A *Farmer's Almanac* or a *World Almanac*

You will need to obtain from the library one or more of the following books for use as references and in order to share with your students the dazzling reproductions of illuminated pages:

The Book of Hours (Park Lane Books, 1982)

The Decorated Letter (George Braziller, 1978)

"The Private World of Illuminations Opens Up Its Doors" (*Smithsonian*, February 1981)

The Golden Age of English Manuscript Painting (George Braziller, 1981)

The Art of the Illuminated Manuscript (Associated University Presses, Inc., 1973)

Birds in Medieval Manuscripts (Schocken Books, 1982)

First, give students some background information (from the above library books) on the history of the illuminated manuscript and on the process of illumination. For instance, ask students if they have heard the term "red-letter day" and if they know what it means. (It comes from the custom of showing special days with red or gold paint.) Or ask students to guess why the manuscripts are called "illuminated" manuscripts; if no one knows, explain that *illuminated* means "to light up," as the pages are "lit up" with gold paint. Students are awed to learn that at one time all books were handwritten and to find out that a scribe might work for years on a single book. Their fascination with the book-making process promotes easy, enthusiastic discussion.

As students pass around the library books, ask them to look at the way that the words and pictures are presented in the illustrations from the various Books of Hours. These illustrations, showing biblical events and the kinds of work done in different seasons, serve as useful models for students. In their own "illuminated" pages, students too will use pictures and words to show the season, special days, and the activities typical of the month.

You may choose to narrow your focus to two or three of the following tasks, or to allow student groups to choose one task each, or even to let individuals or pairs of students follow all of the tasks in sequence.

1. After choosing one month, students think and talk about the scenes they see in their minds when they think of their month. What kinds of drawings and pictures could be used to represent their month? Specifically, what pictures could be used to show:
   —the season? (growing vines, snowdrifts, falling leaves)
   —activities that are typical of the month? (picking tomatoes, flying kites, raking leaves)
   —special days? (holidays, school activity days)
   —the phases of the moon? (refer students to one of the almanacs for this information)
2. Students look through the magazines and greeting cards brought from home, and cut out pictures of people, animals, plants, fancy borders, and ornate letters. As each student selects pictures to match the theme of "winter sports," "spring fever," etc., he or she can talk to the other students in the group about which figures or scenes seem most appropriate for use on the calendar page. (Are some too large? too small? too dull?) Volunteers can draw scenes to supplement the magazine pictures.
3. Working together, students write a four-line poem expressing the theme of their month. One or more students from each group care-

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fully letter the group's poem and draw a large, elaborate first character. (Young students can use the handout on page 9 to prepare a first letter for an April calendar page.) The lettered verse is pasted onto the final "page" *before* the pictures and drawings are arranged, so that the artwork can be arranged to overlap the edges of the verse.

4. For each calendar page in process, one 11" × 14" sheet of poster board is ruled with a grid (first in pencil, then in marker), providing boxes for the individual days of the month. The names of the days of the week and the name of the month are then lettered along the top of the calendar page (or lettered on a separate sheet and transferred, to allow for errors).

5. Working from the assorted drawings and magazine pictures they've selected, students decorate their calendar page. After the verse and the elaborate first letter are pasted down, the students spread out all the artwork on the sheet of poster board and decide which pictures to use, where the border will go, how the drawings, pictures, and the boxes for the days of the month will overlap, and so on. As students design the layout of their calendar page, they are free to overlap the lines of the grid with drawings and pictures. However, they will probably want to leave room in at least a few boxes to write the numbers of the days of the month, so that the page still functions as a calendar.
6. The decorative outer border (drawn on or pasted on) and the "illumination" (gold paint, crayon, or marker) are added in a final step. Have the reference books on hand so that students can use the illustrations as

examples. Students draw vines, tiny animals, or figures of their choosing around the border to replicate the original manuscripts.

As students work together on the final stage of their illuminated calendar pages—the decoration—let them know that you are "letting them off easy"; their predecessors in the Middle Ages had to prepare their own paints by grinding flowers, stones, berries, and even brightly colored bugs! The completion of the project calls for shared congratulations and comments. The illuminated calendar pages are sure to be bright and beautiful, a source of pride for students and a tangible link to the past. You might even consider asking the principal of your school, the PTA, or a local newspaper for a little "illuminating" publicity.

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